



UNITING THE NATION

Establishing an integrated Welsh national road network

**IWA submission to the
Enterprise and Learning Committee
National Assembly for Wales**

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Introduction

“An important point to be considered in any discussion of road provision in Wales is the effect of the virtual non-existence of alternative modes of transport.”

Bob Daimond, *The National Assembly Agenda*, IWA, 1998.

Until the late 20th Century internal road links within Wales, and especially those between north and south, were never a government priority. The economic requirements of the population concentrations in the north and the south, have meant that priority has always been given to east-west corridors linking north, mid and south Wales with England. This was reinforced later by European requirements for strategic routes to Ireland. Road linkages within Wales have seemed of little consequence.

However, the coming of the Welsh Office in 1964, and more emphatically the creation of the National Assembly in 1999 created a different perspective on communications. North-south links acquired a new salience, for at least six reasons:

1. Transport and communications were an important part of the responsibilities of the Welsh Office, followed by the Welsh Government.
2. Communications from all parts of Wales are important in determining people's perceptions of the National Assembly's relevance and effectiveness.
3. Additional journeys between north and south are being generated by the presence of the Assembly.
4. Development of national facilities in Cardiff – for instance, the Millennium Stadium and the Millennium Centre – have increased traffic between north and south.
5. Significant parts of the internal road network pass through the west Wales and the Valleys region, making improvements eligible for European Union convergence funding.
6. In the last ten years the Welsh Government has placed great importance on spatial planning with a view to achieving balanced development.

The 1999 IWA/Atkins study

In light of many of these considerations, in 1998 the IWA commissioned the consultants W. S. Atkins to discover whether a cost-effective, environmentally acceptable approach could be found to reduce journey times between north and south Wales. In addition to the A470 between Llandudno and Cardiff, our study examined the routes starting from Wrexham, the A483 which joins the A470 at Newtown; and from Bangor, the A487 which joins the A470 at Maentwrog.

We sought the following journey time improvements:

- A reduction of one hour from approximately four-and-a-half hours down to three-and-a-half hours in the journey between Bangor/Caernarfon and Cardiff.
- A reduction from approximately three-and-a-half hours to two-and-a-half hours in the journey time between Wrexham and Cardiff.

The outcome of the study was an imaginative proposal for sequential overtaking lanes on both the southward and northward bound directions of these routes, effectively a series of short, dual carriageway sections. We judged that, taken together with existing Welsh Office proposals for improvements to the routes (amounting at the time to some £60 million), the time savings we were looking for could be found.

As important was the improvement in the consistency of travel time offered by these proposals. That is to say, at present a journey on the A470 from north to south can take anything from three-and-a-half to five-and-a-half hours, depending on variables such as time of year, time of day, and the weather. The proposals contained in our report would reduce the impact of these variable conditions.

But most importantly of all, our proposals looked at north-south communications in a holistic way. That is to say, they viewed the route as a single entity requiring an over-arching strategic approach to its improvement. Rather than straightening a bend here or building a by-pass there, as a solution to a localised problem, it adopted an approach that stated that each piece of road improvement would enhance the whole route.

When stated in these terms this approach seems obvious and so much common sense. However, at the time it was not certain that road planners in the Welsh Government thought in such strategic terms. Since the inception of the *One Wales* Government in 2007 there has been a greater appreciation of the value of assessing road improvements in such a strategic light. For instance, a commitment in the Labour - Plaid Cymru Government's July 2007 coalition agreement *One Wales* was to substantially upgrade road links between north, west, and south Wales. As the document stated:

“We will press ahead with improvements to major road links between the North, the West, and the South of Wales, investing £50 million for this purpose over the four year Assembly term.”

As we approach the end of the four-year term it is timely for the Enterprise and Learning Committee to assess what has been achieved towards the fulfilment of this commitment.

The financial implications of the IWA's proposals made more than a decade ago were deliberately modest. We did not want a scheme capable of being immediately rejected because it was way beyond the available budget. The extra expenditure resulting from implementation of the recommendations would have been of the order of £63 million at prices that applied in 1999. We proposed they should be spread over a ten-year period, amounting to an average of £6.3 million a year.

In terms of the overall Welsh roads budget for new construction and improvement these were relatively small sums. For instance, over the period 1986 to 1998 the Welsh roads budget fluctuated between £76 million at its lowest and £140 million at its highest. The extra spending proposed in our report was therefore well within the limits of previous variability in spending.

It provided a classic instance where the new Welsh Government had the capacity to determine a new priority.

We regret that the opportunity was not taken at the time, especially since inflation in construction costs – which traditionally outstrips RPI – will have pushed the total cost up very substantially.

At the same time the public expenditure context could not be worse. The draft capital allocation for 2011-12 for the domestic trunk road network in Wales would see a drop from £75.3m to £56.6m, a cut of 25 per cent from a level that had already been sharply reduced. The capital budget for improving and maintaining local roads would also see a drop from ££68.2m to £24.6m, a cut of 64 per cent.

It is tempting, therefore, to put aside all notions of improving north-south road links. That would be a mistake. All the reasons that led us to undertake our initial study remain relevant. Moreover, road schemes can take a decade or more to plan and construct. Ministers and officials should look beyond the next two public expenditure rounds, and beginning planning for projects that might not come to pass until beyond 2020.

A missed opportunity

Our report, *Uniting the Nation: Improving north-south road links in Wales*, was commended and supported by the Welsh Development Agency and the Welsh Local Government Association. However, nothing happened. Why?

Welsh Government officials were able to side-line the report because at the time their own multi-modal north-south study was being commissioned. Since 1999 the main emphasis has been on improving north-south train links between Bangor and Cardiff, rather than road connections. And, although these improvements are to be welcomed, the fact is that the service runs through England and so is largely irrelevant to the majority of north-south travellers living in the heart of Wales. Moreover, the rail service from north Wales to London (215 miles) is still of much higher quality and quicker than the service to Cardiff (130 miles).

Again, while the new subsidised air service from Valley in Anglesey to Cardiff Airport is of great benefit to a small number of travellers, it can only serve a limited market with limited origin and destination requirements. Leaving aside the environmental impact, it is

encouraging that the take-up of the service has been so good. But the aircraft deployed are small, mainly because if they were bigger the landing charges would increase, making the service uneconomic, even with a subsidy. And, of course, Valley is hardly a central location. Even without road improvements, overall north-south air journey times door-to-door compared with car journeys don't add up for most people living in north Wales.

The principal recommendation in the IWA study – the provision of overtaking lanes at regular points on the trunk road network - was simply rejected by the Welsh Government as not being part of UK highway design and construction practice. Officials said, in effect, that ‘three-lane’ highways were off limits.

This is a mind-set that should be challenged. First, we were not proposing a ‘three-lane’ highway. We proposed dual-carriageway passing places at regular intervals, going north and south. Secondly, a similar approach has been adopted in many other countries around the world – Ireland, Australia, the United States and Norway to name just a few.

There is now a strong case for researching the performance and specification of this kind of road improvement in other countries. After all, what is appropriate for urban England is hardly likely to be appropriate for rural Wales. Our study pointed out that within the UK generally there was a shift away from road construction towards a policy of integrated transport. But it went on to add:

“Such a policy may be appropriate for England; it may be less appropriate for Wales with its scattered settlement patterns and with so little rail and air transport to integrate with.”

And as it also argued, while there are opportunities for enhancing bus and coach services in both urban and rural Wales, these in turn need road space to deliver more speedy and reliable services.

Today’s opportunity

What Wales still needs is the holistic approach to north-south road links, as outlined in our 1999 report *Uniting the Nation*. The arguments for this approach have grown substantially in the years since the report was published, for the following reasons:

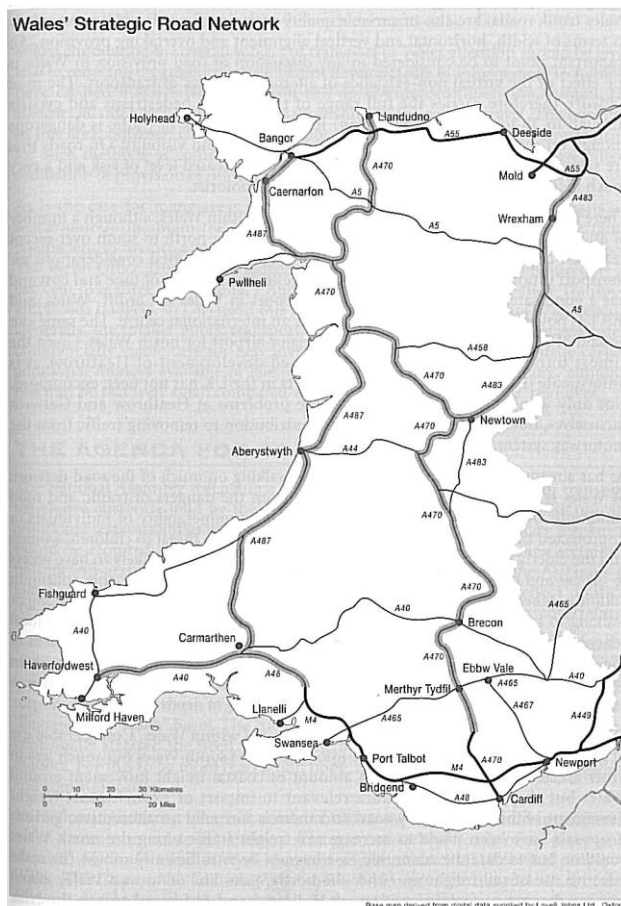
- There was general agreement among the business organisations we consulted about our report that journey times were a critical consideration.
- Journey times by road through the heart of Wales are still variable and unsatisfactory.
- There are significant economic benefits to be gained from improving average speeds and reducing normal journey times.
- There are significant health and safety benefits for the community in general from reduced travelling time, reduced stress, and less pollution.
- The employment prospects of the rural population can be significantly improved by reducing travel to work times.

- Employment prospects for the rural population can also be improved by reducing the transport cost 'premium' affecting business in remote areas.
- Accessibility, a key element of the Welsh Government's social agenda, is dependant to a great degree on the quality of road transport.
- Access to most health, social, education, shops and other services in rural and peripheral areas is dependant on road travel.

Running through these arguments are inter-twining economic and environmental themes, explored in more detail below.

Development domains

The case for improving Wales's internal strategic road network road should be understood in the context of developing a more coherent spatial development strategy for the country. Map 1 shows Wales's internal strategic road network, essentially a figure eight with extensions to Caernarfon/Bangor in the north and Haverfordwest/Fishguard in the south.



Map 1: Wales' Strategic Road Network

Together the A470, the A483 and A487 form the central spine of the network. But what is essential from the point of view of a more radical approach to Wales's spatial planning is how closely this network links to the development of the major settlements in rural Wales.

The essential approach has been set out by Professor Gareth Wyn Jones and his colleague Einir Young at Bangor University in their proposals for development domains across rural Wales. They were published by Bangor University in 2003 as *A Bright Future for Rural Wales*. It argued that all parts of rural Wales should have a special relationship with a nearby urban settlement. It identified a dozen such urban centres across rural Wales and advocated that development should be concentrated upon them (see Map 2). In some cases they were interconnected but dispersed smaller settlements; in other cases relatively large towns.

In broadly-defined rural Wales they identified 12 development domains, including the Irish ferry ports, as follows:

North Wales

- Holyhead/North Anglesey
- Y Fenai: comprising all the communities on either side of the Menai and adjacent villages
- Aberconwy: comprising Llandudno, Deganwy, Colwyn Bay, Conwy and the Junction, and adjacent villages
- Dyffryn Clwyd: comprising Rhyl, Prestatyn, Dyserth, Rhuddlan, and St. Asaph and adjoining communities
- Glannau Madog: Porthmadog, Penrhyndeudraeth, Ffestiniog, Criccieth to Pwllheli

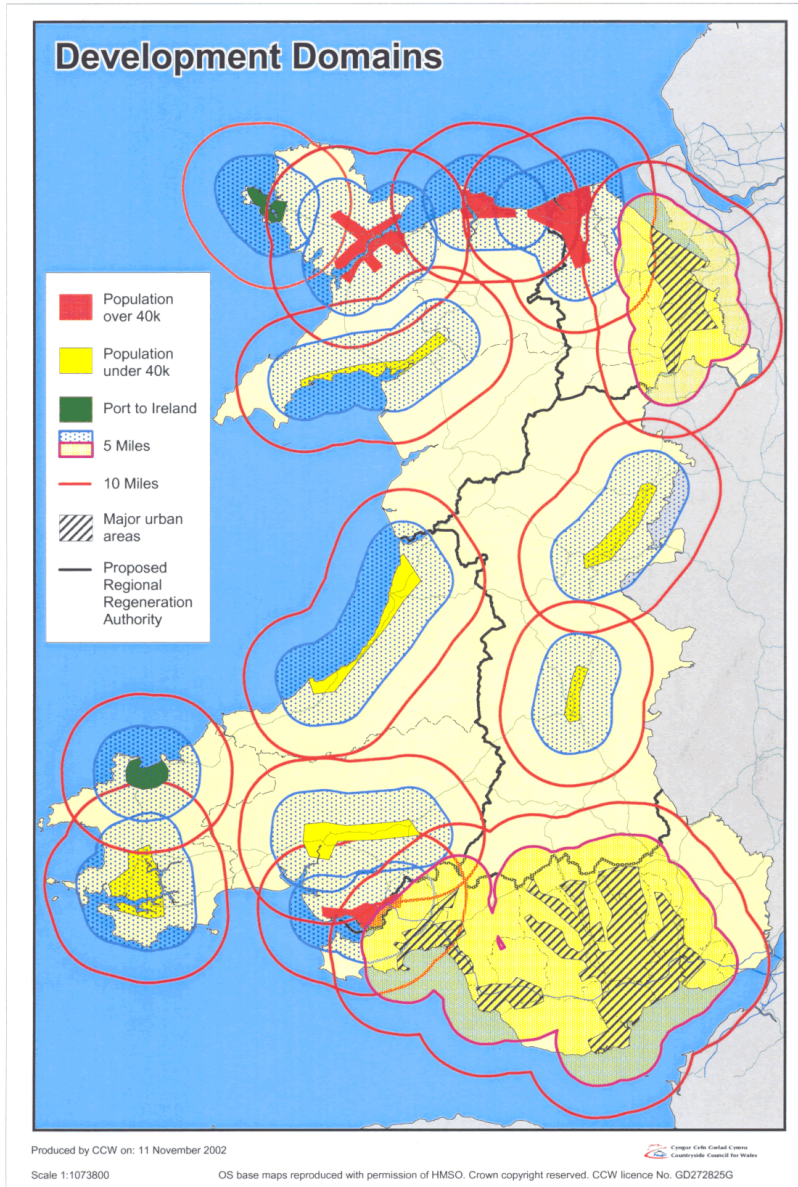
Mid Wales

- Hafren: Newtown/ to Welshpool
- Glannau Ceredigion: Aberystwyth to Aberaeron and surrounding villages
- Llandrindod/Builth

South West Wales

- Fishguard
- Daugleddau: Milford Haven, Haverfordwest, Pembroke, Pembroke Dock
- Tywi: Caerfyrddin and adjacent villages to Llandeilo
- Llanelli: including Burry Port, Felinfoel to Pontardulais

Map 2 gives an impression of their approach. What is immediately obvious is how important the Welsh strategic road network would be in joining up these settlements.



The environmental debate

There is a paradox that one of Wales's leading environmentalists and advocates of sustainable development, Professor Gareth Wyn Jones, has been so vocal in pressing the case for upgrading the A470 along the lines advocated here. In his introduction to our 1999 report *Uniting the Nation* he noted that roads and road building were under sustained attack for at least three reasons:

- Doubts were being cast of the efficacy of road building for increasing economic prosperity.
- European Union commitments to curbing CO2 emissions.
- Concern for the broader impact of road building on the landscape and wildlife.

However, Professor Wyn Jones went on to say that a balance needed to be struck:

“There is a danger of an avoidable conflict arising between environmental concerns on the one hand, and the emerging needs of Wales as a political and economic entity on the other.”

As he has also argued, there is no prospect of cars, buses and other vehicles disappearing. What we should do is minimise their environmental impact. In the short term he said this should mean more fuel-efficient vehicles and lowering the speed limits on our motorways, since speeds over 60mph decrease fuel efficiency dramatically.

It is worth pointing out, too, that many of Wales' internal strategic road routes, and especially the A470, are not very fuel-efficient. That is to say, their bends, junctions, steep gradients, and, generally, lack of passing opportunities, make braking, accelerating and changing gear frequent necessities. All involve high fuel consumption. So improving Wales' strategic road network will have the added benefit of improving fuel-efficiency and reducing CO₂ emissions per journey.

Forward planning – a research programme

What is needed now is new research to revisit our 1999 report and apply the principles it outlined to the wider strategic road network within Wales. The Enterprise and Learning Committee should recommend the following programme of work to the Welsh Government's Economic Development and Transport Department:

1. Identify the key strategic routes that link the regions of Wales that together make up an internal national network.
2. Revisit the arguments made in our 1999 study for regular passing places and apply them to the identified internal national network as a whole. The current traffic flows on the national road network should be compared with those a decade ago to understand trends in road usage, especially in rural Wales.
3. Examine the overall economic case for establishing an internal national road network along the lines proposed.
4. Produce practical proposals and costings for enhancing the identity of the internal national road network by a distinctive, high profile signage.
5. Produce an up-to-date outline assessment of the costs of upgrading the internal national road network over a period of 10 to 20 years.
6. Assess the relative benefits - in economic, social and cultural terms - of this holistic approach to upgrading the internal national road network, compared with the existing plans for road improvement on these routes.

Needless to say, if commissioned, the IWA would be keen to carry out such a study.